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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women
and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled
“Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for
the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives
and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and
initiatives; priority theme: “The empowerment of rural women
and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development
and current challenges”**

Statement submitted by Women’s Learning Partnership for Rights, Development and Peace, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

Statement

Rural women: from beneficiaries and participants to fully fledged rights holders

Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development and Peace has been intimately involved over the past decade in developing and implementing initiatives with the goal of empowering rural women in the Middle East/North Africa region and globally by building leadership capacities, contributing to advocacy for rural reforms and supporting the public and political participation of rural women at the grass-roots level. For several years, we have worked closely with our partners in that region to monitor the participation of women in social change movements and identify and monitor emerging trends affecting rural women.

Historically, rural women in the Middle East/North Africa region have suffered a host of gender biases, the most critical of which is undoubtedly the invisibility of and poor value attributed to the multitude and magnitude of rural women's work. The critical importance of rural women's care work in securing the lives and livelihoods of rural communities cannot be overemphasized, especially as rural women continue to bear the brunt of the impact of the food crisis in addition to the nefarious implications of climate change. The gender biases that rural women face are also compounded by the highly gendered access to property, assets and effective justice institutions. The vulnerability and subordination of women in rural areas is further compounded by the absence of care, infrastructure and other services, as well as by discriminatory practices against rural girls and women, especially in education and health care, and the lack of any form of social protection, including protection from violence.

However, our work over the past decade has shown that concerted and multilevel interventions carry strong and tangible potential for durable change. Indeed, working with rural women at the grass-roots level in concrete initiatives, such as supporting and nurturing the collective organization of rural women in cooperatives, production groups or community groups; enhancing leadership skills and supporting the creation of spaces for political participation; and building bridges between women's organizations, rights-based groups and rural women, have been effective in contributing to positive change for women in rural areas.

As we witness the aftermath of the Arab Spring unfold and recognize the importance of rural areas and the significant number of rural women in the Middle East/North Africa region, we note with concern that the promotion of rural women's interests, emancipation and opportunities does not seem to be high on the agenda of the newly emerging social change movement.

We therefore argue that for real democracy to occur, gender justice and equality need to be at the heart of the current reform processes.

Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development and Peace calls upon new Governments in the Middle East/North Africa region to put in place concrete constitutional and legal frameworks for the enactment and implementation of laws, policies and regulations to address discrimination against rural women and reduce the gender gap, especially in the case of rural women.

Among the reforms recommended, we argue for comprehensive national policies for women's work in rural areas that contain positive, proactive measures that can be implemented to offer women employment and support to help them to lead meaningful and productive lives.

Finally, we call upon new social and state institutions to fulfil their duties with respect to women, especially rural women, and put in place accountability mechanisms that allow for direct interfacing and dialogue with rural women and their representing organizations, as well as milestones and indicators for measuring change and progress.